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**AUTHOR** Bliss, Carolyn  
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## ABSTRACT

Speech act theory jargon has several advantages over the traditional composition jargon. First, it is new and therefore potentially exciting. Its newness means that all students have an equal chance at it and need not feel that because they failed to understand a term presented in high school, that notion is forever lost to them. Second, jargon is fun. It creates an in-group of the informed, a comfortable place to be, especially for a student writer. A final advantage is that speech act theory terms can be clearly defined and demonstrated in ways the student understands. Speech act theory begins to systemize the exploration of the rhetorical transaction between speaker and hearer; it makes this transaction more intelligible and, therefore, more teachable. (CRH)

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## WRITING AS ACTION:

### USING SPEECH ACT THEORY IN THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

A paper presented at the  
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Carolyn Bliss  
Radford University

There was a joke making the rounds at Radford University last year, one of those jokes which depend for their humor on dramatizing dunderheaded helplessness. The joke goes like this: "Did you hear about the guy who locked his keys in his car? Took him five hours to pry the car open and get the rest of his family out." The student who told me this joke was especially amused by the mental image it evoked for him. "Can't you just see them?" he chuckled, "the wife and kids pounding on the windows and screaming to get out?"

Certainly, such helplessness is funny, but some of its analogues are less amusing. In fact, I think the very student who told this story was caught in a similar dilemma. Like the wife and the kids in the story, that is, he had what Chomsky called the competence he needed to complete the task at hand. He had only to open the door. But something about the situation he was in, something frightening or alienating, impeded that competence, blocking its emergence as performance. As teachers of writing, we could all report experiences paralleling that of Robert Zoellner:

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The most compelling and suggestive office interview "happening" occurs when I read the student's utterly opaque and impenetrable sentence or paragraph aloud to him. "Mr. Phillips," I say, "I simply can't make head nor tails out of this paragraph; what in the world were you trying to say?" When I pose this question in this situation, large numbers of students, certainly a majority, respond with a bit of behavior which I suggest may be of immense significance for the teaching of composition. They open their mouths and they say the thing they were unable to write. "Well, Dr. Zoellner," they usually begin, "all I meant to say in that paragraph was that . . .," and out it comes, a sustained, articulated, rapid-fire segment of "sound-stream," usually from five to fifteen seconds duration, which communicates to me effectively and quickly what they "had in mind" when they produced the impenetrable paragraph I hold in my hand. And all I had to do to elicit this fascinating bit of behavior was to ask them to shift from the scribal modality to the vocal modality.<sup>1</sup>

As Ross Winterowd and Dan Slobin have argued, our students do have a thoroughgoing understanding of their native tongue and the potential to use it effectively.<sup>2</sup> "The task of the language teacher," says Winterowd, "is to activate basic competence so that it appears in the arena of performance."<sup>3</sup>

Of course, not everyone agrees either that student writers possess this theoretical global competence or that encouraging what Zoellner calls

a "vocal-scribal reweld" can help to activate it.<sup>4</sup> James Collins, for example, has found that a relatively greater reliance on habits developed from the use of spoken language is evident in the work of weak and unskilled writers;<sup>5</sup> and John C. Shafer cautions us that written texts, which are normally structured as monologues, make far greater demands than do the collaboratively produced dialogues of spoken discourse.<sup>6</sup> Yet Shafer, too, concludes "that a particular kind of oral language transference can help, not hurt, writing. Most students would write better if they channeled some of the liveliness that characterizes their conversation into their papers."<sup>7</sup>

My argument here will be that an understanding of speech act theory and the classroom use of some of its concepts might dig the channels Shafer hopes for between a student's vocal precision and scribal opacity. Speech act theory has this potential because it conceives of writing and speaking as different, but not different in kind. For speech act theorists, the production of language in any mode is an act, or in other words, to say is always to do.

To locate the theory, we might adopt the distinctions of Carnap and Morris between syntactics, which studies the relationship among signs; semantics, whose field is the relationship of signifier to signified; and pragmatics, whose focus is on signs as they relate to users.<sup>8</sup> Within this schema, the theory's emphasis on speech as action and its corollary concern with language in action places it squarely in the domain of pragmatics, the linguistic domain inhabited by most of our students. Speech act theory is concerned with what Dell Hymes has called "communicative competence": the ability to use language purposefully and context-sensitively to accomplish the job of communicating.<sup>9</sup>

It arose in the 1960's largely out of the work of the philosopher J. L. Austin and its development by John Searle.<sup>10</sup> The work of H. P. Grice, especially on implicature and the Cooperative Principle in conversation, is also acknowledged by many speech act theorists, and for good reason. Grice defines meaning in terms of the intention to use an utterance to produce an effect on an audience. This concept of meaning allows a shift from concern with sentences in isolation to concern with discourse in context, a context which includes a speaker's purpose and intentions and the impact of his speech acts.<sup>11</sup>

Such a shift is implicit in the very inception of speech act theory, whose starting point is a dissatisfaction with philosophy's traditional approach to the sentence: one which took as standard a declarative statement of fact, viewed it as independent of the context of other sentences, and concentrated on identifying and describing its truth conditions -- those circumstances which would render the sentence either true or false. In his 1955 William James lectures at Harvard, posthumously published in 1962 as the book How to Do Things with Words, J. L. Austin hypothesized a quite different class of utterances: those which actually accomplish an action rather than describing or reporting that action or anything else, and which consequently cannot be judged as true or false. He assumed that this class, which he dubbed "performatives" (p. 6), could be usefully contrasted to the class of describers and reporters, or as Austin preferred to call them, "constatives" (p. 3).

He first noticed that to utter a performative is to perform the action it names. Thus to say, "I christen thee John," is to christen him John; to say, "I bet you five dollars the Yankees will win," is to bet five

dollars on the matter; and to say, "I promise you I'll go," is to make that promise. On the other hand, to utter the constative, "He's here," seems to be performing no action at all, but merely to be reporting a state of affairs.

Austin began, then, by suggesting a performative / constative dichotomy in speech. But by tackling the vast grey areas of "half pure" performatives like "I blame," which seem both to do and to describe (p. 79), and by refusing, as he put it, "to bog, by logical stages, down" (p. 13), Austin came eventually to the realization that to say is always to do, or, in other words, that all speech is performative. Once this proposition is accepted, it becomes possible to analyze just what a speaker does when he says something. Austin and John Searle after him have decided that he normally does several things, that is, performs several related acts.

First, he produces an utterance which makes sense in terms of the vocabulary and syntax of the language being used. This is Austin's "locutionary act" (p. 94) and results in a meaningful utterance, one with "sense and reference." In Searle's terms, this production actually results from two acts: the "utterance act" which generates "words (morphemes, sentences)" and the "propositional act" which adds to these the dimensions of reference and predication (Speech Acts, p. 24). As Martin Steinmann, Jr. points out, this distinction between utterance and propositional acts is necessary to disqualify as a propositional act a statement which refers to something nonexistent, for example, the statement, "My uncle loves the blonde next door," made by someone who has no uncle and whose next door neighbor is a redhead.<sup>12</sup> However, for either Austin or Searle, an example of these acts would be the production, in appropriate circumstances, of the

sentence: "Mary was present." By issuing this utterance, the speaker is performing the locutionary or utterance and propositional acts of referring to Mary and predicating that she was present.

Normally, and perhaps inescapably, to perform such acts is also to indicate or imply how they are to be taken by the hearer. Is the speaker's utterance to be understood, for example, as a question, command, statement, description, argument, or expression of belief, desire, or decision? When the speaker indicates or implies which one or several of these possibilities best reflect his intentions in producing the utterance, he is adding to his words the dimension which both Austin and Searle call "illocutionary force" and thereby performing the second or "illocutionary act" (Austin, pp. 98-100; Searle, Speech Acts, pp. 22-30).

Illocutionary force may be specified by the use of what Searle calls "illocutionary force indicating devices" (Speech Acts, p. 30), and Austin terms "explicit performatives" (pp. 64-66). Examples are: "I argue," "I request," "I promise," and "I apologize." When they appear, these devices are normally prefixed to the propositional content of the utterance (Speech Acts, p. 30). For example, when I say, "I promise I'll be there," I have specified that the propositional content of my utterance ("I'll be there") is to be taken as having the illocutionary force of a promise. But in an utterance like "Mary was present," the illocutionary force is implied rather than explicit. The force here should be taken as that of a statement, unless some other indication of illocutionary force is given, for example, "I argue that Mary was present," "I deny that Mary was present," or even, "I bet that Mary was present" (Austin, pp. 134-35).

On what basis do we infer illocutionary force when no verbal indicator is present? For Searle:

Illocutionary force indicating devices in English include at least: word order, stress, intonation, contour, punctuation, [and] the mood of the verb [as well as] the so-called performative verbs . . . . Often in actual speech situations, the context will make it clear what the illocutionary force of the utterance is, without its being necessary to invoke the appropriate explicit illocutionary force indicator.

(Speech Acts, p. 30)

Thus, for example, if a student asks a professor to do something, we can be fairly certain that the student's utterance has the illocutionary force of a request as opposed to a command, since the context makes the former more appropriate.

Sometimes, and again as a result of the impact of context, illocutionary force may inhere in a single word. Take, for example, forms of address. Drawing on Roger Brown and Marguerite Ford,<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Cross Traugott and Mary Louise Pratt in Linguistics for Students of Literature cite the varying effects of addressing a man named Henry Jones as "sir, Mr. Jones, Jones, Henry, Hank, Pinky, boy, meathead, sweetheart, or dad" (pp. 226-27). I will use their example to make a slightly different point. The illocutionary force of forms like "sir" or "Mr. Jones" establishes and is appropriate to a relationship of inferior to superior or a cool relationship between colleagues. The reverse relationship, that of superior to inferior, is suggested by the illocutionary force of "boy" and perhaps "Hank" and "Henry," while "Jones," "Henry" or "Hank" might all be used by peers. Increasing degrees of intimacy and fondness are suggested by "Henry," "Hank," and "Pinky," whereas "meathead" implies contempt. The use of "dad"



or "sweetheart" suggests a certain social or familial relationship. As context changes, forms of address and their concomitant illocutionary force will change as well, even when the same two interlocutors are speaking. In private or among colleagues, I address as "Earl" the professor who shares my office, but when students are present, he is "Dr. Brown." Moreover, even the same form of address can shift its illocutionary force as circumstances dictate. As Traugott and Pratt put it, "The simple form Jones could be used, among other things, to greet Jones, to get him to pay attention, to warn him of danger, to order him to stop doing something, or to express surprise at something he just did" (p. 227). In other words, this single word could be used to perform the illocutionary acts of greeting, calling for attention, warning, commanding, or expressing a psychological state in the speaker/writer.

Thus illocutionary force is a slippery and highly context-dependent aspect of the overall speech act. Nonetheless, taxonomies of illocutionary acts are usually attempted on the basis of illocutionary force. I have found it most useful to draw from both Austin and Searle here, as do Traugott and Pratt, and to offer their taxonomy as an example. It posits the following categories of illocutionary acts:

Representatives commit the speaker to the belief that something was, is, or will be the case. These utterances express a belief in the truth of the propositional content. Examples are "Mary was there"; "It's raining"; and "John Glenn will be the next Democratic candidate for President."

Directives attempt to get the hearer/reader to do something. They express, with varying degrees of force, the desire that something happen. Examples are the imperative, "Open the window!" and the gentler "Would you

please open the window?" Because they seek the response of an answer, most questions are directives.

Whereas directives try to direct the acts of others, commissives commit the speaker/writer to a course of action. Like "I promise I'll come," they express an intention on the speaker's part to do something.

Expressives, on the other hand, express nothing but a psychological state in the speaker/writer. The truth of the existence of this state is not susceptible to proof. When I say, for example, "Congratulations on winning the race," or "I'm sorry I stepped on your toe," you have no way of authenticating my sincerity.

In the case of declarations, a truth assessment is also useless, because these are speech acts which make truth. That is, they bring about a correspondence between their propositional content and reality by creating the state of affairs they declare. Because they use language to make something happen, and because here, the saying is undoubtedly the doing, these are the purest examples of performatives. Sample declarations include "I christen thee John"; "I now pronounce you man and wife"; and "You're fired!"

A related category is the verdictive, which delivers a verdict regarding fact or value. Verdictives like "He's a nice guy" or "Bach is better than Beethoven" display the verdictive's tendency to rank or assess.

A final sort of illocutionary act deserving mention is not itself a type, but rather is named for its use, a use to which any other type might conceivably be put. This is the indirect, or what I call the double-decker illocution, one which does one thing by way of another.<sup>14</sup> In the literature, the most often cited example is "Could you pass the salt?" While this

illocution has the direct illocutionary force of a question about ability, it has the much more important indirect illocutionary force of a request to do something. Few of us, after all, are truly doubtful that our addressee has the physical strength, visual acuity, moral stamina, or whatever to pick up and pass a salt shaker. Nonetheless, there are circumstances in which this question might function as the vehicle of its direct illocutionary force. It would, for example, be a legitimate, although highly insensitive, question to ask of a quadriplegic. An illocution might also function both directly and indirectly, as in the case of "Could you open the door?" asked as a request to open the door of a person whose broken leg has just come out of a cast. Thus, attention to the entire communicative context becomes imperative when distinguishing indirect from direct speech acts, as it also is when determining the illocutionary force of any illocution. Assessment of the speech act situation in its widest possible sense is the only way to lessen the ambiguity to which illocutionary force determination is prone.

Further ambiguities invade the taxonomy proper. Is "We find the defendant not guilty" a verdictive or a declaration? It certainly delivers a finding, but at the same time, it makes something happen: because of this speech act a defendant is acquitted. And what of such illocutions as "I hope she'll be there" or "I know that my Redeemer liveth." Like representatives, these acts commit the speaker to something being the case, but since the hope and the knowledge are unverifiable, they would also seem to be expressives. Other examples of taxonomic crossover will spring readily to mind. The purpose of presenting this classification, then,

is less to assure you that every illocution will fit neatly into one of its categories than to provide an indication of the range and uses of illocutionary force.

"Use" is the key term here. For all these illocutions are designed for use, that is, to have some pragmatic impact or effect upon the hearer/reader. The notion of impact brings us to the final dimension of the speech act: the perlocutionary act which produces perlocutionary effect.

As will be clear by now, speech act theory focuses on the speaker/writer's intentions; he intends his act to have a certain propositional content, delivered with a certain illocutionary force and to be so understood. If it is so understood, the speaker/writer has achieved what Austin called "uptake" (pp. 116-117). Suppose, for example, that I am arguing for a Constitutional amendment outlawing abortion. Once you understand that the propositional content of my utterances is: "a Constitutional amendment banning abortion should be passed," and you understand that my utterances have the illocutionary force of argument, uptake has been achieved. I may argue all day and you may understand both what I am arguing and that I am arguing, and yet remain unconvinced. Your continued skepticism, or worse, does not undermine uptake.

According to Austin, uptake must be secured if the illocutionary act is to be successfully accomplished. Yet even this can pose problems. Not only must the speaker/writer clarify propositional content, but he must be sensitive to his audience's need to know. How much information does his hearer/reader have already? How much and what kind of information does he need to "take up" the speaker/writer's point? What kind of diction and syntax will facilitate this uptake? The Gricean Cooperative Principle of conversation can be seen as a strategy for maximizing uptake. It

dictates, among other things, that contributions to the conversation must avoid obscurity and ambiguity, be relevant, and be neither insufficiently nor overly informative.<sup>15</sup>

Now let's suppose that I have cooperated in the Gricean sense and have also been so persuasive that you not only take up my argument but are convinced by it. You enlist yourself under my banner. In this case, I have performed an additional, perlocutionary act and my utterances have had their intended perlocutionary effect. As examples of perlocutionary effects, Austin lists "convincing, persuading, deterring, and even . . . surprising or misleading" (p. 109). Perlocutionary acts are those we do by saying something, whereas illocutionary acts are those performed in saying something. Where illocutionary force is determined by communicative purpose, perlocutionary effectiveness is determined by fulfillment of that purpose.

Perlocutionary effectiveness demands attention to another sort of audience needs and employment of techniques classically marshaled under the rhetoric rubric. To effect perlocutionary purpose, the speaker/writer must consider which rhetorical strategies are most likely to work on his audience. Are his reader/hearers already with him or against him? What arguments will bear most weight with either camp? What tone and diction should he adopt and/or avoid? Of the things he might say, what will be most convincing, least offensive?

Like illocutionary force, both uptake and perlocutionary effect are influenced by context, that is, by the entire discourse situation. If I am drunk, or half asleep, your careful discussion of Kantian ethics may fail to get uptake, and if you are wearing a "Pro-Choice" button, I may

despair of achieving the intended perlocutionary effect of my argument for an anti-abortion amendment. Surely among the most valuable contributions speech act theory can make to our understanding of language and its use is its emphasis on context and on audience needs as part of that context. As Austin insists, "The total speech act in the total speech situation is the only actual phenomenon which, in the last resort, we are engaged in elucidating" (p. 148).

Aspects of speech act context, many of them extra-linguistic, play a major role in the tests employed by both Austin and Searle to determine what Searle calls the appropriateness and Austin the "felicity" or "happiness" of a given illocutionary act (Austin, p. 14). Searle has hypothesized sets of appropriateness conditions for a number of illocutionary acts, but because Austin's felicity conditions are less cumbersome and more easily generalized, I will use these here as I have in my classes. Austinian felicity conditions (see pp. 14-15) may be roughly grouped into three categories which I have labeled: 1) context, 2) content, and 3) intentions and consequences. "Context" would of course cover all the factors we have just been considering. Pratt and Traugott summarize these as including "social and physical circumstances; identities, attitudes, abilities, and beliefs of participants; and relations holding between participants" (p. 226). Also under this heading comes the notion of invoking an accepted, conventional procedure. At 8:00 a.m., it is inappropriate, or "infelicitous," to greet someone with the words, "Good evening"; and at a horserace it is inappropriate to bet on a race which is already run. It is likewise inappropriate to use the slang phrase "hangs out with" in a formal essay on schools of philosophy.

Rules in the second category dictate that the conventional procedure invoked under category one must be executed fully and correctly. If in a marriage ceremony the minister pauses for response and the bride says "Waterloo" as opposed to "I do," the ceremony (and probably the marriage itself) can be judged infelicitous. Similarly, a student who writes garbled or fragmented sentences might be said to have violated category two rules.

A third set of felicity conditions is akin to what Searle calls sincerity conditions, which insist that the speaker know what he means and mean what he says. These are the rules which make lies infelicitous, as well as the unconvincing, unfelt prose written by some of our students.

Breaking the rules in any of these ways will weaken perlocutionary effect and lessen the chances of uptake, sometimes grievously. In Austin's understanding, sins against category one and two dictates are mortal to the speech act, voiding it entirely, while category three transgressions are merely venial. As Austin puts it, an insincere speech act "is achieved, although to achieve it in such circumstances . . . is an abuse of the procedure. Thus, when I say 'I promise' and have no intention of keeping [the promise] I have promised but . . ." (p. 16). Perhaps it is this ability to stay morbidly alive which makes the insincere speech act more dangerous than the unconventional, inappropriate, or incomplete one.

We can now see that speech act theory will provide us with the concepts and terminology to address such common student "misfires" (again the term is Austin's, p. 16) as lack of attention to audience needs and communicative context, murkiness of purpose, unsuitable or unconvincing voice, the deadening which often occurs when the student shifts from the

vocal to the scribal modality, the use of diction which is ineffective or unorthodox in the given circumstances, and even a tendency toward dangling modifiers and sentence fragments. But can all this potential be put into practice? Or, to paraphrase Austin again, how can one do things with speech act theory, especially in the composition classroom?

Claims for speech act theory's pragmatic potential have been large and exciting indeed. Comparing rules derived from speech act theory to those of phrase-structure, semantics, or transformational-generative grammar, Richard Ohmann observes that, "Where transformations and the rest explicate a speaker's grammatical competence, the rules for speech acts explicate his competence in using speech to act (and be acted upon) within the matrix of social and verbal conventions."<sup>16</sup> The domain of speech act theory is thus larger and more inclusive than those staked out by some other approaches. This global inclusivity is also remarked by Edward P. J. Corbett who says:

What is particularly fruitful about [a speech act theory] method of analysis is not only that it allows the critic [or, I would add, the teacher] to range freely from word to sentence to larger units of discourse but that it allows him to unite the provinces of the linguist as he looks at the locutionary act, the semanticist as he looks at the illocutionary act, and the rhetorician as he looks at the perlocutionary act. It moves us from the rather atomistic study of isolated units of language to the larger social, political, aesthetic, and pragmatic contexts of the language.<sup>17</sup>



Such enormous capacity has already been put to work in literary theory and criticism. Speech act theory has been used to attempt a definition of fiction itself, as well as to address specific literary texts and authors. It has also been called upon to correct the new critical myopia which viewed a text only in and of itself, and to encourage the text to be seen as a communicative act. Pratt's well known Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse<sup>18</sup> takes a long step in this direction.

In the application of speech act theory to single texts, perhaps the most cited contribution was made by Stanley Fish in his 1976 article, "How to Do Things with Austin and Searle: Speech Act Theory and Literary Criticism."<sup>19</sup> Although Fish uses this forum in part to warn of certain dangers incurred when the theory is applied indiscriminately, he also constructs a convincing analysis of Shakespeare's Coriolanus as a man who ignores or violates the appropriateness conditions for certain speech acts, notably those of making requests of others, accepting their thanks and praise, and issuing declarations. The acts of making requests and accepting praise imply their performer's dependence on another's action or judgment, and thereby put the speaker in a position Coriolanus abhors. Avoidance of these speech acts betrays Coriolanus's arrogance and fancied self-sufficiency, but his issuing of the unauthorized declaration is downright subversive. When he banishes the citizens who have just banished him, he rejects the appropriateness conditions governing the making of declarations (since he is in no position to do this), flouts convention, and thus challenges the very institutions on which conventions rest. On the other hand, in the speech acts of refusing and promising, both of which show the speaker dependent only upon himself, Coriolanus is proficient.

Fish's approach thus demonstrates both that performance of and preference for certain speech acts can serve as an index to character, and that Coriolanus's fate is infelicitous in part because some of this speech acts are. The article highlights the real-world consequences, at least as portrayed in the play, of language in action or language withheld.

Another analysis, by Richard Ohmann, focuses not on the character's speech acts among other characters, but on those of the author addressed to the reader.<sup>20</sup> Since Ohmann's concerns more closely approach those we have as composition teachers, I will spend a bit more time on his work. As his text, Ohmann takes the following passage from Beckett's novel Watt, a passage which lists the members of the Lynch family and their many maladies:

And then to pass on to the next generation there was Tom's boy young Simon aged twenty, whose it is painful to relate

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and his young cousin wife his uncle Sam's girl Ann, aged nineteen, whose it will be learnt with regret beauty and utility were greatly diminished by two withered arms and a game leg of unsuspected tubercular origin, and Sam's two surviving boys Bill and Mat aged eighteen and seventeen respectively, who having come into this world respectively blind and maim were known as Blind Bill and Maim Mat respectively, and Sam's other married daughter Kate aged twenty-one years, a fine girl but a bleeder (1), and her young cousin husband her uncle Jack's son Sean aged twenty-one years, a sterling fellow but a bleeder too . . . .

(1) Haemophilia is, like enlargement of the prostate, an exclusively male disorder. But not in this work.<sup>21</sup>

To account for the discomfort and sense of dislocation this passage produces in the reader, Ohmann begins by referring to Austin's felicity conditions. Modifying these for strict application to the illocutionary act of assertion, Ohmann says:

To make a statement felicitously, I must, among other things, utter a declarative sentence . . . . I must be the right person to make the statement . . . . I will not get away with stating that the memory of your grandfather just crossed your mind. I must not mumble . . . or break off in the middle . . . . I must believe what I say . . ., and I must not ground my future conduct or speech in a contrary understanding of the state of the world.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, Beckett isn't playing by these rules. When the novel's narrator claims that Kate is a haemophiliac and then appends a footnote denying that she could be, he is violating either the condition of belief in his statement or the condition that this belief shall govern subsequent speech acts. In another kind of violation, the textual gap after "it is painful to relate" signals an incomplete speech act. If the gap is taken as suggesting the narrator's ignorance, it is hard to reconcile this ignorance with his later observation that Ann's game leg is of "unsuspected tubercular origin." Since such a remark implies omniscience (no one else in the story suspects this etiology), the reader is left wondering what the narrator's position is vis a vis the story. Is he or is he not the "right person to make . . . statements [s]" here?

The narrator's speech acts in this passage are therefore void, or at best, insincere and self-contradictory. Moreover, the second sentence of the Footnote ("But not in this work.") exacerbates the confusion by admitting a disjunction between the fictional and 'real' worlds, thus problematizing context to the point that the reader is unsure how to take the utterances. As they did in Coriolanus, these rule infractions call into question the very institutions and conventions, both social and literary, that give rise to them. Worse still, if, as Fish and Searle would have it, speech act rules do not merely regulate, but actually constitute some of these institutions, such infractions may reflect a radical rejection of the very possibility of communication or social cooperation.<sup>23</sup>

The narrator also offends against speech act rules in lesser ways. The passage displays grammatical anomalies and unnecessarily repeats information. Examples are the three "respectively's" and "cousin wife his uncle Sam's girl." It also mixes levels of diction, from the formal "it will be learnt with regret" and "greatly diminished" on the one hand, to the colloquial "a game leg" and "a fine girl but a bleeder" on the other. All these confuse illocutionary force and interfere with perlocutionary effectiveness. A syntax marked more by conjunction than subordination causes similar problems by refusing to assess or evaluate the information presented and establishing instead what Ohmann calls a narrative "neutrality." We end, says Ohmann, with a view of the narrator as demonstrating "a baffling mixture of rhetorical impulses and a dizzy sequence of emotional responses."<sup>24</sup> Surely this is not a narrator (nor did Beckett intend to create one) who expects much in the way of uptake

or achieved perlocutionary purposes. Nonetheless, it is precisely the kind of narrator who best suits Beckett's perlocutionary purposes: to get us to experience the world as he sees it.

As the foregoing summary should suggest, speech act theory may help us go beyond analysis of single texts toward the task of describing an author's style or his trademark perlocutionary effects. J. E. Bunselmeyer, for example, uses speech act theory to account in part for the evaluative stance we feel Faulkner taking in what Bunselmeyer calls the "contemplative" stretches of his prose.<sup>25</sup>

Close reading of texts and stylistic analyses are certainly legitimate concerns and practices in composition classes. But when our students' essays come in, few of us recognize a Faulkner or a Beckett. Can speech act theory help us and our students with their work? Several theorists have suggested that it can. Martin Steinmann, Jr., for example, points to the distinction which speech act theory draws between illocutionary effectiveness and perlocutionary effectiveness, and claims that this distinction may help writers solve the related but not identical problems of communicating a message and producing the desired effect.<sup>26</sup> Noting that complexity and confusion in prose tend to lessen its illocutionary effectiveness, Steinmann speculates, "Perhaps topic sentences, transitions, certain patterns of paragraph or overall organization, definitions, examples, analogies, and so on make [extended speech] acts easier to process. In any case, advice to speakers or writers to use such devices to achieve coherence or unity is based upon the assumption that they make acts more effective illocutionarily." Steinmann admits that we know much less about perlocutionary effectiveness, since this factor is subject to

so many variables; nonetheless, it could be argued that speech act theory has done us some service simply by demonstrating that illocutionary and perlocutionary effectiveness are different goals. The recognition that one can be clear without being convincing is surely a first step toward writing more persuasively.

Steinmann is not here directly concerned with composition teaching, but Winifred Horner, who is, also advocates incorporation of practices and precepts derived from speech act theory. In a recent article, Horner points out that the speech act our students perform in producing expository themes usually differs fundamentally from the act we would like them to perform: that of asserting or affirming.<sup>27</sup> The difference is to be found in appropriateness conditions. According to Searle, one of the preparatory conditions for the successful performance of an act of asserting is that "It is not obvious to both S[peaker] and H[earer] that H[earer] knows (does not need to be reminded of, etc.) p[ropositional content]" (Speech Acts, p. 66). In the case of many student essays and most responses to essay exam questions, this condition does not hold, because the student realizes that the teacher already knows what he has to say and only wants to know if he knows it. The peculiarity of this situation in which the student less performs than imitates the illocutionary act of asserting vitiates its persuasiveness and substitutes the perlocutionary purpose of earning an "A." As ways out of this dilemma, Horner suggests requiring the student to write for a clearly defined audience, perhaps fellow students or even a single, sharply visualized reader other than the teacher. This, she says, will provide for the student an audience with a need to know. She also advises having students choose subjects about

which they know more than their teachers. None of these solutions guarantees that the deadly act of "theme-ing" will disappear from the student's speech act repertoire, and Horner sees difficulties in implementing each. Nonetheless, she argues, both students and teachers need to understand that the illocutionary force of "theme-ing" is artificial.

Of course, many composition teachers are already using the strategies Horner advocates, and have not needed speech act theory to validate them. More novel uses of the theory are suggested in another, oft-reprinted piece by Richard Ohmann.<sup>28</sup> Here Ohmann is taking issue with the hallowed dictum that adding concrete details makes for better writing. Ohmann contends, rather, that adding details may not alter quality so much as meaning. In speech act terms, we could say that these procedures change an utterance's illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect.

In evidence, Ohmann adduces two textbook examples, the first labeled "weak" by the authors and the second "much better." Here they are:

Abstract (weak)

The telephone is a great scientific achievement, but it can also be a great inconvenience. Who could begin to count the number of times that phone calls have come from unwelcome people or on unwelcome occasions? Telephones make me nervous.

. . . More Specific (much better)

The telephone is a great scientific achievement, but it can also be a great big headache. More often than not, that cheery ringing in my ear brings messages from the Ace Bill Collecting Agency, my mother (who is feeling

snubbed for the fourth time that week), salesmen of encyclopedias and magazines, solicitors for the Policemen's Ball and Disease of the Month Foundation, and neighbors complaining about my dog. That's not to mention frequent wrong numbers -- usually for someone named "Arnie." The calls always seem to come at the worst times, too. They've interrupted steak dinners, hot tubs, Friday night parties, and Saturday morning sleep-ins. There's no escape. Sometimes I wonder if there are any telephones in padded cells.<sup>29</sup>

The most obvious change in passage two is that lists of specific interrupting people and the times they interrupt have replaced the passage one generalizations: "unwelcome people . . . on unwelcome occasions." In addition, sensory details have been included in the rewrite, for example, "headache" for the earlier "inconvenience" and "cheery ringing in my ear." But, says Ohmann, both these sorts of changes serve to shift the writer's emphasis from social to personal. Whereas the first passage, vague as it is, establishes a concern with the telephone as part of a shared socio-historical nexus, the revision is interested only in the author's own experience with this instrument. In speech act theory terminology, we might say that the illocutionary force has changed from that of acts which make statements requiring evidence to that of acts whose propositional content need be vouched for only by the speaker. Although the larger illocutionary intent of both passages is verdictive (that is, it assesses or evaluates), in the second version expressives have replaced representatives. This substitution greatly reduces risk, but at the cost



of a corresponding and probably unintended shift in perlocutionary effect. As Ohmann puts it, the narrowed "scope accords well with the impression given by the rewrite of a person incapable of coping with events, victimized by others, fragmented, distracted -- a kind of likable schlemiel. He or she may be a less 'boring' writer, but also a less venturesome and more isolated person, the sort who chatters on in a harmless gossip way without much purpose or consequence . . . ."

<sup>30</sup>

Ohmann does not praise the first passage. But while admitting that it begs for development, he would direct that development toward further exploration of abstractions. He suggests investigation of the paradox of scientific "achievements" which end by infringing on, even imperiling our lives, or the hierarchial social and financial structure revealed when one asks for whom the telephone is inconvenient and for whom it is a tool of power and control. The mere amassing of detail, without attention to the illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect which those details will have, amounts here to what Ohmann calls "a strategy for sacrificing thought to feckless merriment."

<sup>31</sup>

Like Ohmann, I find it useful to have the terms of speech act theory on hand as I attempt to help students grasp such amorphous notions as tone, style, telling detail, support of thesis, and rhetorical effectiveness. The theory can be especially useful in approaching expressive essays, which do not usually have a thesis per se, but which must have a clear, consistent, and unified effect upon their reader.

In "A Linguist's View of the Composing Process," James Stalker cites this sample freshman essay, written in response to the assignment to narrate "My Most Frightening Experience":

<sup>32</sup>

## SNOW SHOE HUNTING

(1) January 4, 1968, today is when my friends Neil, Duane and I are going up to Grayling, Michigan, hunting snowshoe rabbits. (2) The day was like any common winter day in Michigan. (3) Cruising down the freeway we noticed a fine mist collecting on the front windshield. (4) The radio was playing some of the golden top hits. (5) Suddenly the warning light came on, indicating that the car was over heating. (6) I pulled into the first gas station. (7) The trouble was in the automatic transmission, throwing out fluid onto the front windshield. (8) We found at keeping the speed to 50 mph that the fluid level and heat gauge remained constant.

(9) Several hours later we reached Grayling. (10) Snowing quite hard we found a lane to pull into. (11) After scouting around we discovered an abandoned cellar. (12) This we utilized as a shelter.

(13) Two days of bitter cold and deep snow, no luck in hunting, we were ready to head back. (14) However it had rained and froze on, during the night.

(15) With a heavy loaded car we proceeded to make our long journey home. (16) The roads were a solid transparent glass coloring. (17) The only possible way to drive was with two wheels on the shoulder.

(18) We were doing fine until a steep decline. (19) Going as slow as I could we started down. (20) Midway was a curve.

(21) The car went sliding out of control. (22) All that was visible were trees from the other side. (23) Knowing that any moment we would crash. (24) Acting out of mere reflex I hit the power brakes. (25) Anyone knows that this is exactly what you don't want to do in an ice-skid. (26) However we proved statistics wrong, for this time the rear wheels with power brakes caught on the shoulder, of the other side of the road.

(27) With this hair raising experience passed. (28) We had a fairly safe trip home, except for witnessing an one car skid off from I-75 S.

(29) Talking to an older friend about our Snow Shoe hunting trip, I learned that their had been an epidemic which had made the Snow Shoe rabbit almost extinct in the Grayling area.

Stalker notes that one of the theme's major problems is uncertainty about its audience. The short paragraphs and use of a date in the opening sentence suggest that the student is writing for newspaper readers. But from his incorporation of formal diction ("utilized" for "used," "decline" for "hill") and the many participial phrases and clauses, we might infer an attempt to impress an English teacher. A third audience seems to be on more intimate terms with the writer, such intimate terms, in fact, that they will know who Neil and Duane are and accept the occasional conversational informality and sentence fragments. Because the hearers to whom these speech acts are addressed are protean, perlocutionary problems arise.

These are compounded when we consider that the assignment asked the student to narrate his most frightening experience. To fulfill the

assignment, he should have concentrated on the perlocutionary purpose of arousing apprehension and excitement in the reader. Instead, he loses his chance for perlocutionary effectiveness through a long-winded and only tangentially related introduction to the crucial scene, the brief and almost dead-pan narration of the scene itself, and a conclusion which encourages belief that the essay's overriding illocutionary force is irony: the irony of there being no rabbits to hunt in the first place. Perlocutionary effectiveness suffers further from the fact that the essay's title implies an illocutionary intent of asserting facts about something, but is ambiguous even in this implication. Will the writer discuss hunting on snow shoes or hunting snow shoe rabbits? Actually neither illocutionary promise is kept. The essay contains neither snow shoes nor rabbits, and its real force is supposed to reside in a careening car on an icy hill. What Ann Berthoff calls the "supergloss," a concept which incorporates those of thesis and overall effect, must bind a successful extended illocutionary act into a cohesive whole.<sup>33</sup> This writer cannot perform a felicitous speech act without first deciding what it is.

What of the essay's grammatical and usage errors, such as its sentence fragments (23, 27), dangling modifier (10), missing syntax (7, 18), and the use of "their" for "there" (29)? Speech act theory recognizes these as failures to produce propositional content which both refers and predicates or, alternatively, as failures to observe the felicity condition stipulating that a speech act be executed correctly and completely. But if we want our students to stop producing such misconstructions, it is far more important that they see the consequences of rule breaking. These, too, the theory can elucidate. Speech acts are rule-governed behaviors.

Breaking rules makes acts infelicitous. Infelicitous acts are unlikely to be taken up, let alone produce the desired perlocutionary effect. More simply put, errors even at the level of spelling interfere with communication. They put language out of action.

Some of the foregoing observations are Stalker's; some are mine. For Stalker attacks the essay's problems in cohesion, emphasis, and usage through methods provided by text analysis and transformational grammar. My point is that he needn't have. The arsenal of speech act theory houses most of the weapons we need.

I am at present testing this bold hypothesis by using speech act theory as the conceptual base for my freshman composition classes. These classes begin with a week's introduction to the theory, as part of which students are asked to transcribe a few minutes of sample speech acts, produced either by a single speaker or by two or more in conversation. The communicative context for these acts may be a classroom, dormitory corridor, news broadcast, soap opera, TV commercial, family dinner table, sorority or club meeting, in short, anywhere students hear speech acts. I insist that the recorded acts be spoken rather than written to insure greater variety in the samplings; after all, while written speech acts vary enormously in illocutionary force, those students would see are predominantly representatives. I have also assumed that the notion of speech as action would be less foreign than that of writing as action, and that by securing the uptake of the former concept I could encourage carryover to the latter.

These sample speech acts are analyzed for type, illocutionary force, felicity, likelihood of uptake, and perlocutionary effect, both intended and actual. After a random sampling of the samples is discussed in class,

students write up their findings regarding these dimensions of their own transcriptions. Write-ups are discussed with me in conference so that misconceptions and confusions can be minimized.

The exercise has yielded some useful concepts about how language operates. One student's transcription began with her roommate asking her, "What are you doing tonight?" While this looked to have the simple illocutionary force of requesting information, as it turned out, the question also marked an attempt to manipulate the student. Her roommate had invited two boys over for the evening and had promised them the student's company as well as hers. Thus her question was the opening gambit in a campaign to change the student's plans to spend the evening studying. An analysis of illocutionary force produced this insight into strategic uses of language.

A later assignment asks students to observe an organic object for five successive days, write for ten minutes on the object each day, and then use those journal entries to produce a description of the object. I advise them to think of this description as a single, extended speech act with one overriding illocutionary force and a corresponding perlocutionary effect. When students follow this advice, they produce descriptions which do not, for example, begin with clinical detail and end in vague emotionalism about learning to love my friend the peapod. Rather, they aim for a unified impact on the reader. In one successful description, an analogy was drawn between the process of trying to keep a fading rose alive and the student's experience in a nursing home with an elderly, dying patient. Another good description, this one of an apple, was organized around a series of contrasts the student had noticed, while

still another linked the removal of fruit from a tree to her own removal from her family home to college. With a single perlocutionary purpose firmly in mind, these students pruned and shaped their material to produce the desired effect.

Like many writing teachers, I put students' essays through the process of peer group evaluation, and here, too, the theory has proved valuable. Students no longer respond with broad generalities to each other's work. Instead, they consider and record for me the overall illocutionary force, intended perlocutionary effect, and strategies for promoting uptake of each essay, their own and those of others in their group.

In general, I have used the theory as a heuristic for helping students understand how language does its job and to bring clarity into formerly hazy precincts of theory and practice. Instead of style and tone, I can talk about how illocutionary force suits propositional content. Where once I urged students to formulate a thesis and to meet their audience's needs, I can now speak of promoting uptake and maximizing perlocutionary effect.

Does all this merely represent the substitution of one complex jargon for another? Of course. But speech act theory jargon has several advantages over the traditional. First it is new and therefore potentially exciting. Its newness also means that every student has an equal chance at it. No student need feel that because he failed to understand a term presented in high school or junior high, that notion is forever indecipherable. Secondly, jargon is fun. Have you noticed the glee with which beginning graduate students in English spout terms like "semiotic"

and "deconstruction"? First year medical students get a similar kick out of "osteomyelitis" and "teratogenic." Use of jargon creates an in-group of the informed, surely a comfortable place for anyone to be, especially a shaky student writer. A final advantage is that speech act theory terms can be clearly defined and demonstrated in ways the student understands. I have never found this the case with terms like "style," "tone," and "thesis." W. Ross Winterowd has said that "speech act theory begins to systematize the exploration of the rhetorical transaction between speaker and hearer."<sup>34</sup> In so doing, it makes this transaction more intelligible and therefore more teachable.

I am far from hailing speech act theory as a panacea for all the woes of taking or teaching composition classes. For example, it will not do much to promote what the sentence-combiners call "syntactic fluency," although it can speak to the effects of that fluency or its lack. Complex sentences which subordinate or have embedded appositives will bear a more evaluative illocutionary force than will a paratactic string of simple sentences. But speech act theory can't show students how to subordinate or use appositives, any more than it can show them how to avoid sentence fragments and comma splices. Again, it is limited to pointing out what happens when they splice and fragment.

Nor does the theory have a patent on the concerns we've been discussing. Among complementary or related approaches are Burke's dramatic pentad of act, actor/agent, scene, agency, and purpose;<sup>35</sup> Pike's tagmemic heuristic which allows us to place the same thing or concept in the contexts in its own unique features, its changes over time, or its place in a broader scheme;<sup>36</sup> James Kinneavy's emphasis on the centrality of



purpose in discourse;<sup>37</sup> and the interest deriving from Malinowski and Firth in the shaping of meaning by situational and cultural context.<sup>38</sup> Also of interest to practitioners of speech act theory would be Halliday and Hasan's attention to situational context or "register," as well as their influential definition of a text as "a continuum of meaning-in-context, constructed around the semantic relation of cohesion."<sup>39</sup> The list of additional recommended reading could be extended almost indefinitely. Thus I should not be construed as claiming that the speech act theorists have cornered any markets.

A final necessary caveat is an admission that the data isn't in yet. Assumptions and techniques like the ones Ohmann, Stalker, and I are advocating are only now being tested in the trenches. Yet even my own experience steels me to keep trying. To return to the story which prefaced these remarks, it may be that speech act theory can coax our students out of the closed car of writing apprehension and performance impotence into the open air of communicative competence. Can we, as writing teachers, afford to ignore that possibility?

Notes

<sup>1</sup>Robert Zoellner, "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition," College English, 30 (1969), 273.

<sup>2</sup>W. Ross Winterowd, "Linguistics and Composition," in Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays, ed. Gray Tate (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), p. 217; W. Ross Winterowd, Contemporary Rhetoric: A Conceptual Background with Readings (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 18; and Dan I. Slobin, Psycholinguistics (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1971).

<sup>3</sup>Winterowd, "Linguistics and Composition," p. 217.

<sup>4</sup>Zoellner, p. 307.

<sup>5</sup>James L. Collins, "Spoken Language and the Development of Writing Abilities," A paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Dallas, Texas, March 27, 1981, ERIC ED 199729.

<sup>6</sup>John C. Shafer, "The Linguistic Analysis of Spoken and Written Texts," in Exploring Speaking-Writing Relationships: Connections and Contrasts, eds. Barry M. Kroll and Roberta J. Vann (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1981), pp. 1-31.

<sup>7</sup>Shafer, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup>See Richard Ohmann, "Speech, Action, and Style," in Literary Style: A Symposium, ed. and trans. Seymour Chatman (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 259.

<sup>9</sup>Sell Hymes, "Competence and Performance in Linguistic Theory," in Language Acquisition: Models and Methods, eds. R. Huxley and E. Ingram (New York: Academic Press, 1971).

<sup>10</sup>My discussion of speech act theory depends largely on the following sources: J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words, Second Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); John R. Searle, Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969); John R. Searle, "A Classification of Illocutionary Acts," Language in Society, 5 (1976), 1-23; and Elizabeth Closs Traugott and Mary Louise Pratt, Linguistics for Students of Literature (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980). Further citations to these references will be made parenthetically.

<sup>11</sup>H. P. Grice, "Meaning," in Readings in the Philosophy of Language, eds. J. Rosenberg and C. Travis (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 442. Rpt. from The Philosophical Review, 3 (1957), 377-88.

<sup>12</sup>Martin Steinmann, Jr., "Speech Acts and Rhetoric," in Rhetoric and Change, eds. William E. Tanner and J. Dean Bishop (Mesquite, Tex.: Ide House, 1982), pp. 96-97.

<sup>13</sup>See Roger W. Brown and Marguerite Ford, "Address in American English," Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 62 (1961), 375-85.

<sup>14</sup>See John R. Searle, "Indirect Speech Acts," in Syntax and Semantics, Vol. III, Speech Acts, eds. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (New York: Academic Press, 1975), pp. 59-60; Herbert H. Clark and Eve Clark, Psychology and Language: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), p. 29; Kent Bach and Robert M. Harnish, Linguistic

Communication and Speech Acts (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1979), Chapt. 9; and Johan Vander Auwera, Indirect Speech Acts Revisited (Bloomington: Indiana University Linguistics Club, 1980).

<sup>15</sup>H. P. Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in Syntax and Semantics, Vol. III, Speech Acts, pp. 41-58.

<sup>16</sup>Ohmann, "Speech, Action, and Style," p. 247.

<sup>17</sup>Edward P. J. Corbett, "Approaches to the Study of Style," in Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays, p. 92.

<sup>18</sup>Mary Louise Pratt, Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

<sup>19</sup>Modern Language Notes, 91 (1976), 983-1025.

<sup>20</sup>Ohmann, "Speech, Action, and Style," pp. 441-59.

<sup>21</sup>Samuel Beckett, Watt (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 102.

<sup>22</sup>Ohmann, "Speech, Action, and Style," p. 247.

<sup>23</sup>See Fish, p. 1008.

<sup>24</sup>Ohmann, "Speech, Action, and Style," p. 242.

<sup>25</sup>"Faulkner's Narrative Styles," American Literature, 53 (1981), 424-42.

<sup>26</sup>See Steinmann's "Speech Acts and Rhetoric," p. 99-100.

<sup>27</sup>Winifred B. Horner, "Speech-Act and Text-Act Theory: 'Theme-ing' in Freshman Composition," CCC, 30 (1979), 165-69.

<sup>28</sup>"Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language," in The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook, eds. Gary Tate and Edward P. J. Corbett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 379-89.

<sup>29</sup>David Skwire and Frances Chitwood, Student's Book of College English (Glencoe Press, 1978), pp. 348-49.

<sup>30</sup>Ohmann, "Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language," p. 382.

<sup>31</sup>Ohmann, "Use Definite, Specific, Concrete Language," p. 382.

<sup>32</sup>CEA Critic, 40, No. 4 (May 1978), 15-23.

Don Berthoff, Forming / Thinking / Writing: The Composing Imagination (Montclair, N.J.: Boyton / Cook, 1982), pp. 185-88.

<sup>34</sup>Winterowd, "Linguistics and Composition," p. 211.

<sup>35</sup>See, for example, Burke's pentad as modified and explained in William Irmscher, Holt Guide to English, Third Edition (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), pp. 27-44.

<sup>36</sup>See Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970).

<sup>37</sup>See James Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1971), p. 2.

<sup>38</sup>B. Malinowski, Coral Gardens and Their Magic, Vol. II (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1935), pp. 18 and 51; and J. R. Firth, "The Technique of Semantics," in Papers in Linguistics, 1934-1951 (1935; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

<sup>39</sup>M.A.K. Halliday and R. Hasan, Cohesion in English (London: Longman, 1976), p. 25; see also Shafer, pp. 17-18.